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THE STUDY OF DRAMA IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

Having always been extremely fond of the theatre, and having retained in my memory delightful recollections of reading in school *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, in preparation for seeing them produced, I was attracted during my college days to a course bearing the title, "History of the Drama." From the first day that I attended the course I found it a delight—and a wonder. Why had nobody in school ever told me that there had been other play-writers beside Shakspeare? Why had I never read Goldsmith, Sheridan, and others? With much hesitation, and ashamed of my disloyalty, I came to the conclusion that my course in high school, which I had deemed so broad, was peculiarly narrow. I wondered why it was.

Two years later I began to teach, and then I saw a few reasons why: there were so many other things to do; there was so much the tendency in the teaching of English to keep along the beaten path; there were so few books available; and there was so much of the old prejudice against anyone or anything connected with the stage. By frequent friendly talks with pupils then and since, I gradually learned much concerning their acquaintance with theatrical matters and their tastes; and I came to see that my own interest in the subject was the least important consideration. The schools which paid elaborate attention to instruction in the laws of embroidery, music, and art were doing nothing to inculcate in future citizens equally high standards of the drama. Boys, and sometimes girls, were going once a week, or oftener, to see vulgar musical comedies, lurid melodramas, or so-called "problem plays" with little or no claim to truth or artistic merit. If something really good came to town they stayed away;—they inferred, from experience in school, that anything which could by any chance be called artistic or literary must be "something stupid that you picked to pieces," as one of my pupils once defined a classic. The parents of these pupils were no help either. They felt secure with a Shakspeare play, which they might attend with the feeling of performing a sacred duty, but beyond that they merely "knew what amused them."

Here, then, was an opportunity which the school was failing to grasp: the theatre, a powerful force in society, was being absolutely ignored, and the drama, containing some of the noblest work in all literature, was being treated as unworthy to take its place with the other arts.

Following these observations have succeeded five years of experimenting in the formulation of a course in the history and technique of the drama, which would meet the needs of high school pupils. Even yet, the plan is not entirely satisfactory, — but each class helps me to come a little nearer an adequate working plan; and each of the last three years I have enjoyed the inestimable privilege of courses in history of drama and playwriting under the instruction of Professor G. P. Baker, of Harvard, whose interest and co-operation have been of the greatest aid in all my problems. Without these courses, or their equivalent in individual research, I do not see how it is possible to do justice to work in the drama, an art which is so much misunderstood.

The following outline, with all its imperfections on its head, has a three-fold aim: (1) To acquaint the students with the development of the drama since its beginnings; (2) To enable them to discriminate a little more correctly between what is true and beautiful and what is false and inartistic in the plays which they see or read; (3) To make them so much enjoy what is good that they will refuse to be satisfied with anything lower.

The course as it stands at present consists of two parts: I. History. II. Technique. These two parts carried on partly by lectures, partly by class discussion is intended to give (1) a cursory view of the development of drama and the forces contributing thereto, from the fifteenth century to the present; and (2) to give the students a working knowledge of the technique of dramatic art. Hence, it is evident that the two subjects, while considered here under two separate heads, must be carried on more or less at the same time. The text books which can be used for systemizing and illustrating the subject are: Brander Matthews' *A Study of the Drama* (Houghton Mifflin), Manley's *Specimens of Elizabethan Drama* (Ginn), the *Bells Lettres Series* (Heath), certain *Everyman* volumes, Dr. Elizabeth Woodbridge's *Law and Technique of the Drama* and Alfred Hennequin's *The Art of Playwriting*. The plan of the course, accompanied by wide supplementary reading and the frequent discussion of current plays as illustrative material is as follows:—

1. Lectures: What Constitutes a Play. Comedy. Tragedy. Kinds of Drama.
2. Lectures on Classic Drama and Theatre.
3. Discussion of *Antigone* or *Agamemnon*, and of one classic Comedy.
4. Lecture on Tropes and Miracles.
5. Discussions

of *Sacrifice of Isaac*, *Noah's Flood*, and *Secunda Pastorum*. 6. Lecture on Moralities. 7. Discussion of *Everyman*. 8. Lecture on English Imitation of Classic Models. 9. Discussion of *Ralph Roister Doister*. 10. Lecture on Elizabethan Theatre and Writers. 11. Discussions of Lyly's *Alexander and Campaspe*, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, and *Tamburlaine*, Part I, as Heroic Drama, and Part II as Tragedy. 12. Lecture on Shakspeare and His Work. 13. Discussions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, taking approximately an act a day. 14. Discussions of *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. 15. Lectures on Restoration Period, Heroic Drama, Comedy, and Great Actors. 16. Discussion of Dryden's *Conquest of Granada*. 17. Lecture on Eighteenth Century Comedy: Goldsmith and Sheridan. 18. Discussions of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*, and Goldsmith's two plays. 19. Lectures on Drama of 19th Century: Romantic Period and Closet Drama. 20. Discussions of Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, Tennyson's *Becket*, Browning's *The Blot on the 'Scutcheon*. 21. Lecture on Robertson and His Influence. 22. Discussion of Robertson's *Caste*. 23. Lectures on Modern Drama: Gilbert and Sullivan; Ibsen and His Influence; Pinero, Jones, Wilde, and Shaw; the Irish Drama; Continental Writers of Influence. 24. Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*. 25. Discussions of Pinero's *Trelawney of the Wells*, *The Magistrate*, and one serious play, the choice depending on the maturity of the class. 26. Discussions of Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* and *Arms and the Man*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Yeats's *The Hour Glass* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*; Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. 27. Final Test or Essay.

In adapting this outline to his own special case, the reader should bear in mind several points. In the first place, the outline is not followed rigidly: two lectures may be expanded to five, if the class is interested enough to interrupt and ask for the application of certain technical principles to a concrete case. The pupils' questions are always given precedence over the planned work, and the freest discussion of plays with which the class is acquainted is urged. The class may be one whose highest ideal is *Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl*, in which case the discussion starts with that as a basis. We look at the play honestly and without any spirit of derision to see where the plot is old, where the incidents are forced and unreal, where the characterization is inconsistent and untrue — or where, perchance, it is right. Under no circumstances is any individual's opinion ridiculed, even though he may rate nameless melodramatists on a plane with the immortal William. By thus giving each pupil confidence in his own judgment, we get the frankest statement of tastes. And one of the delights to the person conducting the course is to

observe the gradual—and unconscious—change of the pupils' tastes, as manifested in the written papers or personal conversations. Finally, the plays discussed formally in class represent but a small portion of the pupils' reading. The supplementary reading, however, I do not take into consideration at all in marking the pupils. They understand that it is for pleasure and to furnish a source from which they may choose plays for frequent written discussions. Of course, too, the reports, consisting merely of the amount read each week, serve the instructor as a sort of thermometer for measuring the enthusiasm. It is the rare pupil who does not report at least four extra hours a week.

The written criticisms I consider of the utmost importance to the students as a means of clarifying their thought; and I find that the students themselves agree with me, since their comments on last year's course expressed almost unanimous desire that the number of review papers and essays discussing the problems in technique be increased. These criticisms, from four to twelve pages in length, are generally built more or less closely around the following outline, which I dictate early in the course. This scheme the pupils may apply to any play which they read or see within the next twenty-four hours. They realize that the outline is merely suggested as a help, and is not intended to hamper or restrict them; so, as their knowledge and discrimination increases, their own individuality covers the bones of the skeleton more and more adequately.

OUTLINE FOR DRAMATIC CRITICISM

- I. Classification of play, and arguments therefor.
- II. Theme.
 - 1. Fitness for dramatic treatment.
 - 2. Ethical value.
 - 3. Human appeal.
- III. Plot.
 - 1. Statement of.
 - 2. Completeness.
 - 3. Novelty.
 - (a) of material.
 - (b) of treatment.
 - 4. Emphasis—right or wrong?
 - (a) of plots.
 - (b) of characters.
 - 5. Motivation.
 - 6. Climax.
 - 7. Interest.
- IV. Characterization.
 - 1. Variety and contrast.
 - 2. Interest and appeal.
 - 3. Are all the characters necessary to the plot?
 - 4. Are they properly emphasized?
 - 5. Are they types or individuals?
 - 6. Are they true to life?

V. Dialogue.

1. Is it interesting?
2. Has it variety?
3. Is it true to life — convincing?
4. Is it dramatically useful, or merely literary?

VI. General remarks.

1. Novelty of play as a whole.
2. Relative proportions of plot, character, and dialogue.
3. Interest, timeliness, ethical importance.
4. Acting parts.
5. Excellence of the actors in various roles.

This outline indicates also the line of thought followed in general in the class discussions. Of course, there come in all sorts of related questions the discussion of which we never postpone, for they are generally suggested by some interested student. Some of those raised last year were: What is there in *Everyman* which makes it grip even a modern audience? Wherein lies Shakespeare's superiority as a dramatist over his contemporaries? What is there in *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals* which makes them still so popular? Why were Tennyson's and Browning's plays failures when produced? Could not a good play be made out of *The Lady of Lyons* if a less sentimental writer did it over? Is it true that Ibsen is an immoral writer? What makes a play moral or immoral? Don't you think Wilde's wit is very self-conscious? Are Shaw's later plays as good technically as his earlier ones?

There is another way in which the technical side of the work may be made to appeal to the more enthusiastic pupils. At the beginning I say to the class that if there are any who would like to try their hand at writing a one-act play, I shall be glad to help them. I urge nobody to write — the attempt must be voluntary, — but I get some very interesting results. Of course, the greatest difficulty is to dissuade the more ambitious from a five-act tragedy in the Shakesperian mode, so confident are they at first. The first year in which the opportunity was offered I received one long morality in blank verse and a delightful little mediaeval drama also in verse; but these were the work of two very unusual girls and do not by any means represent the average. The next year I received a farce which was presented by the seniors at their annual social. It was crude, of course, but it compared favorably with many which we have obtained from the play-dealers; and the important point was that the author learned a vast deal about drama construction in the writing, revising, and rehearsing of his own little play. Last year I received three plays, one of which was worth revision with a view to production at senior social. This work, of course, is done entirely out of class in conference with the teacher.

I am aware that some of my co-laborers in this very exigent field are beginning to wonder how I manage to get this amount of time to spend on an "extra." In the first place, I do not consider the work an extra, but, rather, of prime importance; in the second, I am merely concentrating my attention for four or five months on a subject which, in most schools, is treated four or five times, one month at a time, during the four years. Moreover, assuming that out of the forty months available we devote fifteen to rhetoric and composition and twenty-five to literature, it does not seem to me disproportionate to spend four consecutive months in hard study of drama, when we have twenty-one remaining to devote to the novel, the essay, and poetry. In detail, however, the four years' course in literature is arranged as follows:—

FRESHMAN YEAR. First half—Gayley's *Classic Myths and Old Testament Narratives*; second half—American Literature and one Shakespere comedy. The pupils' attention is directed to the story, the characterization, the comic relief, and the beautiful poetry, some of which is committed to memory. The pupils grow very much interested in planning stage sets and costumes and in deciding how certain scenes should be acted, drawing the evidence for their arguments from the text. Again, as in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, they like to know that it was probably written for a wedding celebration, and to find out for themselves the various ways in which Shakespere has handled his material to suit the occasion. In this way they come to perceive the right emphasis of the plots and the purpose that each serves. Here, too, of course, will enter inevitably questions and discussion concerning the comparative merits of this and other plays which they have seen.

SOPHOMORE YEAR. Rapid readings illustrating the literature of the 17th and 18th centuries. Sheridan's *Rivals* and Goldsmith's two plays are suited to this year and may be read with sufficient thoroughness in ten recitations, studying especially emphasis of plot, type-figures, and varying excellence of dialogue.

JUNIOR YEAR. The 19th century poets and novelists.

SENIOR YEAR. Burke for five weeks; Milton for six weeks; and Shakespere, who is treated merely as one—even if the most important—figure in the development of the drama. His work is illustrated by pretty careful study of the three tragedies listed among the college requirements, and more rapid reading of three of the comedies. In all we spent about four months.

Some, doubtless, wonder how we get along with so little attention to the philological side of the text. It seems to me that the teaching of literature is a matter of proportion and of judicious omission. I suppose that much of the text does

go by my pupils without their succeeding in grasping its full meaning, but that disturbs me little. Of course, matters of text that affect the pupils' appreciation of the play as a whole must be explained; but I prefer to omit minute dissection and devote my time to making the pupils so interested in the book or play that they will care to read it over and over, finding for themselves more perfect understanding with each reading. Indeed, I measure the value of the course to the special class chiefly by the degree of my success in accomplishing this purpose; also by the amount of supplementary reading done and the independence of the comments thereupon; by the degree of the pupils' ability to discuss intelligently, in writing, any drama from their outside reading; by their eagerness to discuss the subject with me and with each other, and, finally, by their comments on what they have gained or failed to gain from the course as a whole or in part. As a matter of fact, my classes are my severest critics in the matter of the efficiency of the course. They know perfectly well when I have handled a point in such a way that they fail to get the most from it, and they tell me so with perfect courtesy — and frankness, both of us understanding that it is for the sake of the next year's class. This feeling of responsibility for the success of the experiment is one of the things which I work hard to rouse at the beginning of the course; and the assistance I have gained from past students has been invaluable.



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